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Planting Trees in Drought Fields: A Story of Tree Planting With Children in an Elementary School in Pakistan

Nadia Anjum

This article describes my experiences getting children involved in tree-planting activities in a school setting. The tree planting was carried out in a public girls' elementary school situated in the village of Mohra Mari, Tehsil Gujar Khan, District Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The school is a part of the Union Council Kauntrilla in Punjab Province. The school's tree-planting activities were organized by school staff and by students, along with their parents, who also participated in the campaign. Considering the important role that trees can play in protecting societies and local communities, tree-planting activities are a useful curriculum resource for young children, providing them with hands-on learning experiences.

PAKISTAN AS A LANDSCAPE

Trees are crucial for people and for communities in Pakistan. My country is among the top 10 countries in the world to be affected by global warming. According to the Global Climate Risk Index published by Germanwatch, Pakistan ranked eighth of the 10 countries most affected by climate change from 2000 to 2019 (Germanwatch, 2021). The melting of glaciers and the eruption of glacial lakes pose a great risk of flooding. Yet, on the other hand, Pakistan also faces acute deforestation caused by drought. The major cities of Pakistan, including Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, are experiencing severe heat waves and excessive levels of pollutants. To tackle this, the government of Pakistan has introduced the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami, also called Plant for Pakistan, a five-year (2018-2023) tree-planting plan (Shah, 2018). Part of the National Forest Policy, it supports forestry and afforestation (i.e., planting trees where there were none before) throughout the country. Punjab as a province has developed its own policy, the Punjab Forest Policy (2019), to implement the national planting program. This policy aims to maintain, expand, and maximize forest sources in a systematic, environmentally sustainable, ecologically solid, economically feasible, and socially equitable way.

All departments working within the Government of Pakistan's educational authority have implemented tree-planting programs in schools. Public and private schools working under the jurisdiction of the Punjab School Education Department have also implemented the tree-planting drive.

TREE PLANTING IN MY SCHOOL

The school I work in was established in 1987 on the primary level and upgraded to the middle level in 2009. It is a girls' school with 176 students. There are 11 teachers: one head teacher, four elementary teachers, and six primary teachers. All teachers have qualified teacher training through a bachelor's or master's degree. There are 10 grades, starting with early childhood education (ECE) and going up to eighth grade (elementary education). The school is a solid concrete building with five classrooms. It has its own toiletry facilities for children and for teachers. The whole school area is approximately three kanals with 16,335 square feet.

Tree plantation in schools is carried out each year under the directions of the School Education Department. However, in 2022 tree plantation had unique importance because the 75th (Diamond Jubilee) Anniversary of Pakistan's Independence was celebrated by planting 10 billion trees.

The staff of my school decided to convert this tree-planting drive into an awareness campaign and fun activity. It began on August 1, 2022, focusing both on the students and their parents. We displayed banners and charts inside and outside the school to raise awareness about tree planting among students, their families, and the community.



Figure 1. Children from first and fifth grades display charts and a banner as a part of the tree-planting awareness campaign

The tree-planting campaign aimed to:

1. Celebrate the 75th Independence Day of Pakistan
2. Help make the local environment pollution-free
3. Promote an environment-friendly attitude among teachers, children, and their parents
4. Create a sense of responsibility about the environment on the part of students

Independence Day is August 14th. We made all our planting arrangements a few days before. The campaign was self-funded, and every student and teacher brought their own plants for the activity. We chose to plant shrubs and trees such as Bougainvillea and Tangy Mango that would do well in the dry soil on the school grounds.

On the day, our students and teachers were all present to take part in tree planting. We started at 9:00 AM and divided everyone into groups in order to plant 200 trees.



Figure 2. A first-grade child wearing a tree hat plants a pink Bougainvillea



Figure 3. Children from fifth grade plant trees on school grounds



Figure 4. A fifth-grade child plants a tangy mango tree



Figure 5. A child from first grade holds a tree she is about to plant

This planting mission greatly increased students' awareness about trees and shrubs. We noticed that students not only took the planting seriously and acted responsibly during the process. They also learned a lot, because they had to select suitable tree species, plant them in the ground, and think

about how to take care of them so they would thrive. The tree-planting activity was also useful for teaching lessons about the structure of a tree, different tree species, the importance of trees in the environment, and environmental pollution. It also supported curriculum-based learning. For example, students gained information about science and the environment. They learned how to plant trees, as well as how to take care of them. They learned about the parts of plants, the processes of photosynthesis and respiration, and the role of plants in our surroundings. In addition, they learned how plants are beneficial to the planet and central to making it pollution-free.

The students also participated in active learning (Dewey, 1938). They learned about the importance of teamwork. The tree-planting awareness campaign was turned into a fun activity, and the students were very excited to have a change in their school routine. They were energetic and eager to take part in tree-planting activities. The teachers and students were dressed in green, representing trees and the green in the Pakistani flag (green is a national color in Pakistan).



Figure 6. Children wear green to celebrate tree-planting day and Independence Day

Students participated in the activities enthusiastically and helped each other. They also took an oath to look after the planted saplings, to plant more shrubs and trees, and to encourage others to do the same.



Figure 7. Students at the end of the tree-planting ceremony

Bringing nature to the elementary school students, who face remarkable pressure because of external standardized assessment, was a welcome relief. Now the barren landscape is surrounded by greenery, singing birds, and blooming plants. As a teacher, I noticed that we did not need to train the young students to like shrubs and trees. The students consider the new greenery around them to be dancing and singing. They even want to hug their trees and bushes—which is delightful to see.

The tree planting with my students reminded me of my childhood, when I always enjoyed the company of trees and nature. My town is in a semi-rural area where I was privileged to be with trees and nature most of the day. In fact, my school was surrounded by green fields used for agriculture. A friend had a huge vegetable garden that provided vegetables and fruits for the local community. I often visited this garden. This is why taking part in the tree-planting activity with the children and describing it filled me with the same joy I feel when I'm outdoors with trees in the vast green fields. Now when I look at the school grounds, it eases my soul to look at the birds, bugs, and the natural world.

Planting trees on the school grounds does not come without its challenges. For example, at first, it was difficult to communicate with parents to convince them of the importance of tree planting. Initially, most of the parents did not agree that their children should clear bushes from the school grounds to make it suitable for tree planting. To them, their children were coming to the school to learn, not to work outside clearing the school grounds. After negotiating with them, and explaining that their children would be learning by doing (Dewey, 1938) and how they would benefit from outdoor learning, the parents agreed.

Once we started doing the activity, we realized how much students were learning from their outdoor experiences. For instance, students learned why they could not simply put a tree or shrub on the ground to let it grow by itself. They also learned the importance of the type of soil we had. Drought soil was one of the major challenges of our tree-planting activity. The school ground is hard because we do not have enough rain in the area. The soil in the area is not so fertile that we could plant any type of plant. Keeping in view the characteristics of the soil, we selected those plants that would grow without needing fertile soil and lots of water.

We used this experience as a learning opportunity for the students to explain how tree planting in different areas may look different. For example, tree planting in their home gardens, which are usually well-maintained, may feel easier than on the school ground because of the poor soil in the school ground. This means the students need to do a lot of work to take care of the trees they have planted.

Another challenge was to create awareness among the community in a rural area. We held a meeting with the close network, including parents and other notables from the village, to raise their awareness about the school campaign. We also displayed banners outside and inside the school. We distributed brochures to students and their parents. To further develop students' awareness within the school, we performed a drawing competition on the theme of "tree plantation." We also did not have any funding for the project. To overcome the financial challenge, we gathered donations from the school staff, parents, and from the local community.

Students remain active stakeholders in planning for tree planting at the school. They are eager to continue tree planting, not just at the school but in the local community as well. Some of them wished to be the tree guardian or custodian, volunteering to take care of the trees they and their peers had planted. They suggested that each student in the school should be given opportunities to adopt a tree. The students also offered to make use of their pocket money to put toward tree planting in the future.

Based on what students shared about the activity, I am determined to start a Green Team, an environment-friendly initiative, at the school. The primary goals of the Green Team will be to:

1. Plant trees outside and inside the school with the assistance of other students and parents
2. Protect existing treescapes by adopting a tree

As a teacher, I noticed that if you engage students in making plans for tree planting, it gives them opportunities to learn new skills, including teamwork, organization, and communication. Because of the tree-planting activities, students in my school consider themselves to be caretakers of the trees at the school and outside in the neighborhood. The tree-planting activity was a hugely successful activity and an opportunity for school students to learn about the natural environment through the principle of Do and Learn.

PLANTING FOR A GREENER FUTURE

One of the most serious problems in today's world is the devaluation of trees. To make our world greener and better, it is urgent that we engage students in tree planting for a green future. By doing this, we create possibilities for students to learn how and why trees are vital in our lives and for the life of our planet. In addition to developing new knowledge and learning, these activities also enable students to see themselves as responsible citizens. The success of the tree-planting activity as a part of Pakistan's 75th Independence Day celebrations in my school proved that in the future such activities should be expanded to involve more schools. The lesson learned through this tree-planting campaign should convince policymakers to empower schools to organize such events in schools at the larger district level.

The students who have participated in the tree-planting activities pledged to plant more trees in the school ground, in the front yard, backyard, and in other areas of the school. They also are willing to plant trees around their own houses. As a teacher, I feel proud that my students are making a strong contribution to taking care of the environment by planting trees and looking after the trees they have planted.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nadia Anjum has completed her MSC in Pakistan Studies and an MA in Education from Allama Iqbal Open University in Islamabad, Pakistan. She joined the teaching profession 11 years ago and now works as a Primary School Teacher (PST) in Government Girls Elementary School Mohra Mari Markaz Kauntrilla, Tehsil Gujar Khan, District Rawalpindi, Pakistan. She teaches English, Science, Pakistan, and social studies to children in her school.